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Final Paper

East Asian Youth and Global Futures

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East Asian students at the IEI

As a group, our project began with a broad question of how the students from East Asia give meanings to their experiences at the Intensive English Institute (IEI), and how their experiences and expectations are shaped by prevailing forces such as neoliberalism, accumulating cosmopolitan capital, and the idea of a global space. We tried to see how East Asian students' study abroad decision, experiences, and expectation at the IEI are affected by the exterior forces, and at the same time, how the students navigate these prevailing discourses to create unique subject positions as competent global citizens. In addition, we were also interested in how the IEI is reshaping itself faced with the flux of East Asian students.

Shaping our research questions, we drew upon the existing literature on neoliberalism in general (Duggan 2003), and neoliberal subjectivity and global education particularly in East Asia (Anagnost forthcoming, Genda 2005, Lukacs forthcoming, Abelmann et al. forthcoming, Song 2007) and the U.S. (Brooks 2001, Ong 2006). The previous scholarship on the topic shows that the neoliberal trend and changes emphasize individual responsibility, self-development, privatization, and technical education rather than cultural/moral education. And the literature provides contextual information about our research subjects, particularly after Asian financial crisis in 1997, the decade-long Japanese recession, and with rapidly developing China.

We used face-to-face individual interviews as our methodology. We conducted interviews with eight IEI students and one IEI instructor. Our interviewees include two Japanese, one Taiwanese, and five Korean IEI students with one American instructor. In general, they are in their 20's and most of them are undergraduate/graduate students with a few exceptions. One Japanese interviewee is employed, and another Japanese interviewee is taking a break between changing jobs.

The interviews with the students confirm that neoliberalism affect their decision to come to the United States in order to study English. As the push factor that compels the

students to seek study abroad opportunities mostly designed to improve their English proficiency, neoliberal subjectivity is explicit in the narratives of the students. Particularly with the decreasing role of government to guarantee welfare of citizens, and with the heightened sense of job insecurity and more intense competition, neoliberal discourse is taking a significant role to explain these East Asian students at the IEI. Indeed, the interviewee's narratives are full of dreams and aspirations for academic/career success in the future, overlapping with neoliberal discourses of self-development and self-management. For the interviewees, learning English plays pivotal roles for their future plans either to go beyond IEI program pursuing further degree-seeking programs in the United States or to be competent enough to get a decent job in their home countries.

For example, Kerry admits that she “doesn’t like to learn English,” but that she “really, really needs English” for her research and further study in the future. Another interviewee, Eunhee says that she has strong motivation toward learning English because she wants to build experiences in working with foreign companies after graduating her college in South Korea. Even though many of the interviewees are not sure about specific future plans for now, they believe that English is necessary to extend their future life opportunities in this globalized world.

Likewise, through the interviews, we were able to learn that the primary purpose of the students coming to the United States and the IEI program at the University of Illinois is in order to learn English. However, at the same time, cultural experiences in the United States are not less important for them. Most of the interviewees mentioned how they develop themselves not only through English learning but also through other experiences in the United States. They value their socializing with Americans and other foreign friends from different countries, and their new experiences in a new country with a different culture.

For example, Eunhee said, “playing is studying here (in the United States).” In other words, accumulating cultural capital with global/international experiences is another important aspect of studying abroad for Eunhee. Another interviewee, Kim, values her club activity with other UIUC undergraduate students on this campus, and she is proud of being close friends with her American roommate. Kerry’s explanation about her changing perception toward Black people is also interesting. Kerry had fear of Black people due to the media depiction of violence of African Americans in the past, but she now recognizes that Black people are very nice upon making friends who are Black, an African international student at the IEI and African Americans she met through her current roommate, on this campus.

These examples of the interviewees, emphasizing both learning English and accumulating cosmopolitan capital with global experiences in the United States, indicate that instrumental education and cultural/moral education may not be mutually exclusive. While Aihwa Ong and Brooks problematizes the trend of education toward instrumental/vocational directions at the expense of cultural/moral education, our interviewees seem to be experiencing not only instrumental education, language learning, but also cultural/moral education in the United States.

However, the emphasis on cultural/moral education does not necessarily mean that their experiences are separate from instrumental, namely neoliberal aspect of education. It should be noted that, as Anagnost describes, every aspect of the educational – not only test scores but also the character-building spheres – has become commodified, in a package of “quality education.” In that sense, the boundary between technical education of language learning and cultural/moral education of multicultural/global experiences becomes blurred. The complaints about the presence of too many Koreans at the IEI from the interviewees and the interviewees’ narratives of learning English during socializing with foreign friends are examples of the blurred boundary between technical education and cultural/moral education.

With neoliberalism and globalization, not only the students see themselves as self-entrepreneurs, but also the educational institution, the IEI, sees itself as a business within this global education network. The interview with one former instructor at the IEI reveals that the institution tries to customize its curriculum and makes efforts to recruit students from Non-Asian countries in order to satisfy the demand of a multicultural education from its students. According to Nancy, the former instructor at the IEI, the issue of the overwhelmingly Asian demographic of the IEI is a sore point for both the administration and the students. Because of the heavy Korean presence at the institution, Korean students joke that the IEI should instead be called the “Intensive Korean Institute” and complain about the preponderance of Korean students. Because the IEI is a business and it should satisfy the demands from the students, the administrators try to actively recruit students from various countries and to divide classes up by nationality such that each class is as diverse as possible.

In addition, in order to satisfy the demands of some Asian students, who are highly oriented towards improving their test scores such as TOEFL, the IEI offers a specific grammar class, a specific pronunciation class, and even a dedicated TOEFL class. Indeed, one of our interviewees, Han, expresses his expectation for higher TOEFL score by attending the IEI classes. While this division of language learning satisfies the demand of Asian students, who

expect this type of curriculum, it contradicts some ESL pedagogical theory that valorizes task-based learning, where each aspect of language learning – reading, writing, listening, and talking – are strung together in a single course that emphasizes “tasks.” The example of offering a dedicated TOEFL class may not, as Nancy notes, assist in improving a student’s English in a real sense, but it does satisfy the need to replenish student enrollment in an increasingly global, market-oriented education system. Likewise, through the interview with a former instructor at the IEI, we recognize that not only students but also institution itself is taking part in neoliberal discourse with the form of global/multicultural education as a business.

Whereas these findings confirm how the experiences of study abroad participants from Asian countries are structured through neoliberal discourse, individual narratives from each interviewee reveal that individuals give their own meanings to their study abroad experiences. Our ethnographic data illustrate study abroad participants are not always passive followers of the neoliberal current, but rather constantly negotiating between conflicts and contradictions within their own life context. One Korean student, Chul, says that English skill is not necessary to work for Korean companies for most of people, but the companies still want to hire people with English skills. Criticizing the boom of English learning, Chul explains his learning English as an enjoyable challenge. Even though it is controversial to decide whether he is following neoliberal discourse or resisting the discourse, at least he is trying to give different meanings to his presence in the United States and his studying English.

The interview with Koji also shows how he gives meaning to his study abroad experiences based upon his own circumstances. Because his stay in the United States is financed by his company in Japan, he still emphasizes the traditional relationship between employers and employees with lifetime employment and loyalty for a company. At the same time, he also supports part of neoliberal work style, which requires workers to be flexible and responsible through constant self-development, just like he is studying English in the United States. His position as a beneficiary of typical traditional Japanese companies influences his interpretation of study abroad experiences.

The most common conflicts, according to the interviews, come from different opinions of the parents. Parents’ expectations often conflict with their children’s plans, and the parents’ opinions significantly affect the decision making processes of their children. Sometimes the parents are more into the neoliberal discourse, but in other cases, parents have rather more traditional values. Particularly interesting case is the different views between Eunhee and her parents about her future. According to Eunhee, gender becomes an important factor to form a

certain expectations of the parents. Eunhee's parents are against her study abroad because they still expect their daughter to live somewhat traditional feminine life as a Korean woman, while Eunhee is highly oriented toward professional success. While she is taking time off from her everyday lives in Korea, taking English classes at the IEI, Eunhee is navigating between different expectations from her parents and her own of going to graduate school in the United States in the future.

On the other hand, Kim is having conflicts with her parents about her major and future jobs. Kim originally wants to become a vet, but her parents want her to study business related major and work in an international marketing field. Her parents are really supportive about Kim's study abroad and they want Kim to stay in the United States and go to an American university rather than going back to her university in South Korea. Thus, Kim is thinking to go to a college in the United States after the IEI program, but she has not decided what to major and still is negotiating among different choices.

The most extreme case of the conflicts with parents is Kathy's story. She is not at all interested in global education and accumulating cosmopolitan capital. She has no expectation towards her presence at the IEI in the United States, and she gives no meaning to her study abroad. She is staying here just because she is forced to do so by her parents. She wants to work for Taiwanese government in Taiwan, but her parents insist her going to graduate school in the United States and becoming globally competent person in the future.

In other interviews, the students from East Asia also show that they are using the opportunity which was not available in their home countries. They can use new possibilities in a new country, because of different cultural norms in East Asia and the United States. Kim is navigating the second chance to become a vet, which she was not able to achieve in South Korea. Yoshiko is having a new opportunity away from the strict age norms in Japan.

As we can see from the examples above, East Asian students at the IEI are not passive followers of a fixed neoliberal subjectivity, but at the same time, they are not active agent to pursue their interests free from any constraints. In reality, they are navigating and negotiating with their own life circumstances. To conclude, from the interviews, our group was able to see how East Asian students at the IEI program fit in to the idea of neoliberal subjectivity, while they accumulate cultural capital with global/American experiences. By investigating the ways in which Asian students at the IEI give meaning to their study abroad experiences, we were keen to explore how the narratives of the interviewees are informed by neoliberalism and the extrinsic factors that push these students to seek the study abroad experiences in the United

States. At the same time, we were able to see how these students exert a presence of their own, by shaping the very institution where they choose to study and creating new social spaces that are supposedly cosmopolitan and multicultural. In addition, faced with different conflicting and contradicting expectations and circumstances within their own life context, we were intrigued by the emergence of subtle negotiation and resistances from the students.

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